

The End

[by Constance Malleson]

Sunlight filled the room. With a slow, steady brightening the light came up. On it came, wave upon wave, flooding the small square room, shimmering and breaking across the faded carpet. Hour after hour on the sofa the girl sat on, rigidly insensible to all sensation, weary, hopeless. The future loomed before her stripped bare of everything save endurance. She saw herself dragging through life as if clad in heavy folds from her shoulders, making them ache intolerably. It seemed a cloak of incredible weight, trailing along the ground for ever and ever, weighted with the whole of the world's failure and despair, clammy with the wet slime of loneliness, chill with an ice-cold horror ever rising and rising, killing all warmth, freezing the very heart.

The girl leapt up with a sharp cry as the acute pain, shooting through her tangled nerves, set something in her free. With half-blinded eyes she gradually became aware of the light. Her hands fell open, and, timidly holding them out, she felt the sun's warmth against her upturned palms. She stood quivering there, desperately hesitating, a dim pale hope stirring in her heart. Forming swiftly, it leapt of a sudden into life. She breathed quickly, darting rapid glances about the room, which was bare of flowers and wore a cold, neglected look. Seizing in one hand a well-worn purse from the little writing-table, and in the other an empty jug, she darted out of her room and down the darkness of the cool narrow passage out into the street. O, the glory of it! The great splendid world, full of light and all edged with gold. There, opposite, the Museum, immense, stony, austere. Overhead, an infinite depth of blue. Climbing the sky, an endless cavalcade of careering great clouds . . . *caparaconnés.*

Such a vibrating stillness--then out of it the whirring thrill of wings as a flight of burnished pigeons settled on the strip of green behind the Museum railings. "The joy of them!" she half wished, running down the street, swinging the empty milk jug and laughing, laughing.

And all the time, between her short tense message over the chemist's telephone, between the little flower shop and the dairy and the grocer ("Quarter of streaky, please!")--all the time the same swift thought sandwiched itself in: "Surely he will come; surely he will come!"

She flew round the streets as a bird flies, collecting here a bit, there a bit, for the perfecting of the nest. And then home to her two rooms, where she flung the windows wide and made gay the brightly painted mantelpiece with a haze of mixed sweet peas and starry "love in a mist". Such a polishing and a tidying! The tea-tray was set out for two, the shining blue tea-caddy filled with China tea--a whole half-pound. And then, standing tip-toe on the fender, peering into the one cracked mirror in its old Italian frame, she fastened across her forehead a green ribbon, of the same beautiful shade that the publisher opposite had painted his front door, just that delicate tint like carved Chinese jade. Having fastened the narrow ribbon across her forehead and threaded it through her black smooth hair, she took up a book and, settling into the corner of the sofa, sat down to wait.

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For a long time she read steadily, then, when ten o'clock struck from the church near by, she got up to make a last round of inspection. Coming back to the sofa, she found she had lost all interest in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, so she wandered over to the window and, leaning far out, she swept the street with eager, anxious eyes. The half-hour struck--"He can't be long now!"

She went back to the sofa and, turning back a couple of pages, began to re-read. But at every sound of nearing footsteps she would stop and listen; not many people came down her side of the street, and of those that came, some walked too loud, some too slow, and others came clattering carelessly along, so free, so sure of themselves, so intent on their own business, so ... so terribly *apart*, that she began to doubt the reality of her own existence.

She sprang up, every nerve on edge, and started walking the room, up and down, backwards and forwards, crossways, every way, and then stopped dead: "Surely ... surely ... *yes!*" Someone was outside, at her door. A fierce sick excitement came over her, paralysing mind and will, clutching her swaying body. And through the swimming silence she heard the faint irregular tinkle of the bell next door. As if released from a

vice, she fell face downward on the sofa, and, twisting her body from side to side, she began talking out aloud; moaning, more than talking: "If he came now it would be no good--no good now--no good--no good!"

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Slowly and stiffly she moved her head as all the old weariness came creeping back, stretching, pulling, tearing her to breaking point. Then, suddenly, a great tiredness enveloping her, she let go. It was so good to sleep--just to sleep.

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She came to with a start. How cold it was, and dark! She ached all over. Bending down over her watch she found it was long past midnight.

"He would have been home ages ago. He must have had the message a long time now--and he wouldn't come."

"He wouldn't come!"

A hot wave of anger and hate surged up in her, but with all her force she beat it down, steeling herself to the dawning desolation, murmuring: "I'll wait, I'll wait till the very end."

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His letter had come: it lay open in her hand. She stood gazing at it, a small suffocating lump rising in her throat; it hardened as it rose, it seemed somehow to have got behind her eyes, then into her brain; it was crashing through and through her whole head. Very quietly she placed the letter on her dressing-table, putting on top of it a heavy malachite box he had given her. And then she went and lay on her bed, quite still, for a long, long time. Slowly, slowly, "trailing clouds of glory," memory opened out before her.

She saw the wild Cornish coast. In the infinite distance she heard the gulls crying, crying, far up above the high places of the land. She felt again the relentless, inexorable force of eternal things, as when her lover had taken her into his arms, and from the depths of each other's eyes they had understood the whole of the scorching pain, the torture, the despair of two souls made one, alone--in eternity. Above, distant, terrible, the torn crimson sky flew tattered across the horizon, while below it seemed that the black, thundering sea, hurling and battering itself against the land, shrieking along the rocks, must needs shatter the very core of the reeling universe.

She started up from her bed shaking from head to foot, and stumbling forward she lay tearing the coarse floor matting with fierce bleeding fingers. Twisting herself up off the ground she groped out into space, clutching the past with frenzied hands while life lay broken before her, rent from end to end.